

Unleashing the animal within: exploring consumers' zoomorphic identity motives

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Unleashing the animal within:
Exploring consumers' zoomorphic identity motives

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Unleashing the animal within:

Exploring consumers' zoomorphic identity motives

Abstract: Through netnographic inquiry, we explore the practice of zoomorphism by one group of “anthromorphs”—Furries. We identify three interconnected narratives (escape, healing, and power) that members of the Furry subculture deploy to make sense of the world. Exploring these narratives further, we identify why these consumers are drawn to zoomorphism as a means of self-authentication. Building on this, we also identify two ways (constructing a fursuit and engaging in ritualized animalistic behaviour) in which Furries reinforce their communal status through authoritative performances that involves “giving oneself to the animal spirit”. To our knowledge, this study represents the first examination of Furry consumer culture and contributes to our understanding of human-animal relations through insights for anthropomorphism, zoomorphism and the extended self. Specifically, we identify that Furries draw on an anthropomorphised animal spirit to heal feelings of disconnection with the postmodern world. In contrast to studies on anthropomorphism, consumers draw on animal spirits to define their internal sense of self and operate more effectively within the world.

Summary statement of contribution: Our findings demonstrate the differences and relationships between anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. We provide insight into the creation of identity via zoomorphism and creative consumer practices focused on achieving self-authentication. In doing so we identify three ways in which anthromorphs (Furries) practice authenticating acts and two means in which they engage in authoritative performances to rebuild connections to the postmodern world. This research provides insight into consumer culture theory by drawing attention to the role animal-human relationships can enable consumers to overcome feelings of isolation and meaninglessness.

Keywords: zoomorphism; anthropomorphism; authentication; Furry; netnography

Introduction

Commercial culture is replete with mascots of humans who assume animal identity (Brown, 2010). Examples of commercialised zoomorphism include Hollywood franchises such as *Batman*, *Spiderman*, *Wolverine* and the *X-Men*, comic books, fiction anthologies and “how-to-draw” guides featuring “Furries”. The presence of human-animal creations also exists in other areas of pop-culture, such as minotaurs (Tauren) and werewolves (Worgen) as playable characters in the multiplayer game, *World of Warcraft*. Contemporary literature continues to reinvent shape-shifter (human-to-animal) archetypes in the *Twilight* and *True Blood* novels. Designer toy brands such as *Kid Robot* have also found success with the sale of plastic toys that mash together animal-human forms, while brands such as *Ferrari*, *Jaguar*, and *Skoda* draw directly on animal (horses, birds and big cats) associations to reinforce claims of functional superiority. Clearly, the relationship between humans and animals is of cultural significance.

In this article, we examine consumers engaging in zoomorphic identity practices (“Furries”) in order to expand our understanding of anthropomorphisation. Zoomorphism is “the attribution of animal traits to human beings, deities, or inanimate objects” (VandenBos, 2007, p. 1011). History has recorded many examples of humanity drawing symbolic power from animals (Holak, 2008); cultural groups often use animals as symbolic totems and deities for worship (Brown, 2010; Bryant & Forsyth, 2012); animal adornments are used to convey forms of self-expression (Ferreday, 2011); and in rituals, such as Amazonian tribes consuming powerful animals as a means of absorbing their power (Fausto, 2007).

Although zoomorphism is etymologically the opposite of anthropomorphisation, research suggests the relationship is more complex than implied in the dualism between nature and culture. As Doniger (2005, p. 38) identifies, the very animalistic qualities we adopt when engaging in zoomorphism are themselves constrained by our humanity—we can

never, in effect, escape anthropomorphisation. That is, without having direct mental access to the animal world, any meanings we ascribe to non-human species are by necessity culturally constructed (Ahuvia, 2008)—who after all is to say that bats are elusive, wolverines aggressive, or spiders sneaky? This relationship is emphasised in the non-random choice of animal mascots by the marketers behind *Jaguar* cars, *Cobra* beer, *KangaROOS* sneakers, *Crocs* shoes, or the characterisation of *Raid* bugs as “dirty” (Brown, 2010).

Thus, we position zoomorphism as a form of anthropomorphism, and study the motives behind this form of consumer self-authentication, through an examination of the motives and practices of “Furries” (sometimes identified controversially as “anthromorphs”). Research on Furries’ note their interests and behaviours uniquely combine anthropomorphism and zoomorphism (Gerbasi, et al., 2008, p. 219) with few Furries rejecting their human status totally. Gerbasi et al. (2008, p. 198) define Furry fans as people who “identify with, or view themselves as, one (or more) species of animal other than human”. Furries attend fandom conventions, create and or consume Furry fiction, congregate in cyberspace and adorn themselves with animal identifiers (Ferreday, 2011).

Given the lack of research on zoomorphism, and the misrepresentation of Furries as sexual deviants (reinforced through *Vanity Fair*’s 2011 feature by George Gurley and the *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* episode “*Fur and Loathing*” (first aired on October 30th 2003) (Probyn-Rapsey, 2011) little is known about Furries, and to our knowledge, no formalised consumer studies of this subculture exist. We believe being a Furry is an identity narrative focused on achieving self-authentication through zoomorphism (Furries are those most likely to embody an animal spirit both mentally and through their consumption practices; Probyn-Rapsey, 2011). Thus, Furry fandom presents an interesting site to examine an under-researched area of anthropomorphisation and a heretofore-ignored identity myth.

This article has the following structure. First, we review the literature to locate our study within the consumer identity tradition. Second, we provide details on our netnographic investigation. Third, we present our findings, focusing on three ways in which Furies deploy zoomorphism. In closing we discuss theoretical and managerial implications, and suggest areas for future research.

Literature Review

Researchers have drawn on theories of the extended self (Belk, 1988) and interactions (Holbrook & Woodside, 2008) to categorise and unpack the motives underpinning human-animal relations. Within this stream of research, anthropomorphisation and the related practice of neotony have featured strongly (e.g., Hirschman, 1994). However, the motives and practices associated with zoomorphism have remained ignored by consumer culture theorists. Zoomorphism and the use of such images can be witnessed across many cultures, for example, the Natick Indian use zoomorphism to strengthen their relationships with animal spirits and prayer rituals (Van Lonkhuizen, 1990); African tribes wear animal adornments to express transformation and connection through interspecies communication (Lorenz, 1998); and iconic characters such as *Spiderman* whereby zoomorphism allows protagonists to call upon special powers due to a connection with a deeper primal force (Ulbricht, 2005). Apart from using zoomorphism as a projective technique (Woodside, 2008) to our knowledge there have been no consumer studies on this tendency.

Although commonly identified in the media as “anthromorphs”, the Furry fan community is highly heterogeneous. As Gerbasi et al. (2008) identify, Furies are those “anthromorphs” who adopt a fursona (or a Furry persona—the focus within this article). Although the media often lumps Furies and Plushies together, in emic terms a Plushie is a person who loves cuddly toys (this term can also describe someone who is sexually aroused

by stuffed animals). Furies contrast themselves with hobbyists (those more interested in Furry fiction, comic art, or elements of play and style), Non-Furies or “Fleshies”. Most Furies identify with just one animal, fantasy, or mash-up species (Gerbasi et al., 2011). Although the motives remain unexplored, most Furies prefer canines, dragons, feline, and/or mixed species such as a “folf” (a hybrid of a fox and wolf), or a “cabbit” (a mix of cat and rabbit). Unsurprisingly, primates are rarely chosen by Furies as their animal identity (Gerbasi et al., 2008).

Given that there are so few studies on zoomorphism, we know relatively little about the nature of Furry fandom. All too often, research and the media portrays Furies as sexual deviants (“yiff” being the term for Furry pornography) or as suffering from psychological disorders¹. For example, Bryant and Forsyth (2012) identify Furrydom as a form of deviant behaviour and trivialise the community by identifying their practices as simple breaches of societal dress codes. Given this stigmatisation and trivialisation it is not surprising that few Furies display their identity to the wider public (Gerbasi et al., 2011). Gerbasi et al. (2008) surveyed fans in order to challenge these stereotypes. The results of this study, and a larger, follow-up survey (Gerbasi et al., 2011) assessed the extent to which Furies felt trapped in a human body or desired to be less human. Although Furies report not being fully human at rates twice the population norm, few see their humanity in wholly negative terms (Gerbasi et al., 2011). Those Furies (just 25 per cent) desiring emancipation from their human form are controversially (Probyn-Rapsey, 2011) identified as suffering from “species identity

¹ Despite their stated intent, Gerbasi et al.’s 2008 study was savagely criticised by Probyn-Rapsey (2011). The focus of this attack was the conclusion that Furies suffered from “species identity disorder”. Probyn-Rapsey (2011) questioned the means by which the authors constructed a normal control population (made up mainly of undergraduate psychology students), the low sample size (subsequently addressed in Gerbasi et al., 2011), and the failure of the authors to come to grips with the deep-seated motivations of Furies in general.

disorder” (Gerbasi et al., 2008). The majority of Furies surveyed have an “undistorted” image and are believed to be motivated by a desire for socialization with like-minded others and sharing interests such as anthropomorphic art (Gerbasi et al., 2008; Gerbasi et al., 2011). Likewise, although the sexual orientations of most Furies sit outside the so-called normal range (for the United States), reported examples of zoophilia or Plushie love are rare—the majority of male Furies tend to be homosexual or bisexual whereas female Furies are mostly heterosexual or bisexual (Gerbasi et al., 2008).

Beyond descriptive surveys that have been criticised for failing to empathise with the motives of Furry fandom (Probyn-Rapsey, 2011), and reviews of online communities that lump together all consumers engaging in some form of zoomorphism (including those embodying animal characteristics in online games; Ferreday, 2011) little research explores the motivations and consumption practices of Furies. For example, although anthropomorphic culture is about “trying on a new skin” (Nast, 2006, p. 316) or connecting with a perceived non-human part of their self, we understand little about why people self-authenticate in this way; other than reports that the majority of Furies believe they share some characteristics with their chosen species (Gerbasi et al., 2011). Similarly, while the majority of Furies seek to engage with like-minded others (Myer, 2003), many seek escape or self-expression (Gerbasi et al., 2008; Nast, 2006). However, the nature of these authenticating acts and authoritative performances (Arnould & Price, 2000) remain a mystery.

Based on this review, we propose Furies deploy animal spirits as one means of achieving the authentic self against a background of postmodern fragmentation and disconnection (Arnould & Price, 2000; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Although zoomorphism has not received direct research attention, there is an implied recognition of this practice in the shift from viewing animals as chattels (or pets) to companions (Hirschman, 1994;

Holbrook & Woodside, 2008; Spiggle, 2008). For example, in relation to animals and the extended self, Hirschman (1994, p. 618) states, “In this role, the animal’s traits, behaviours, and appearance are seen as being those of its owner; the owner projects his or her own personality onto the animal and absorbs the animal’s nature into himself or herself.” In rejecting the notion that animals are possessions, Spiggle (2008) identifies that consumers may see pets as a mirror of themselves, while Keaveney (2008) notes how owners often learn to embody positive aspects of their horses that then become part of their identity. In all cases, there is a recognition that zoomorphism can occur.

Research on pet ownership, identity and anthropomorphisation throws up many interesting questions regarding Furry fans. Although Furies engage in zoomorphism to achieve self-authentication, what are the possible socio-cultural motivations for such behaviour? Since Furies adopt an animal identity partly out of a desire to escape, what are they seeking escape from? Could the search be a rejection of societal rules and a reflection of the id or our untamed nature? Hirschman (1994) suggests we delight in animals because they can live according to their desires—they can rage, engage in gluttony, sexual promiscuity, and other primeval instincts. Belk, Ger, and Askegaard (2003, p. 338) equate human animality with a pre-cultural force, potentially representing our untamed side (Mosteller, 2008).

Are Furies seeking emancipation from market-based culture? Or, are Furies using animal identities as symbolic resources (Spiggle, 2008) in order to further other, market-based identity goals? That is, can animal characteristics help us in the marketplace? Keaveney’s (2008) study of horse-owners suggests so. Furthermore, are Furies seeking to fill a personal void in their lives (often a motivation behind animal-human relations; Hirschman, 1994)? Brownlie (2008) notes that people can use their relationships with animals to help further the construction of their own human identity. Likewise, animals are viewed as having

souls in many religions (Holak, 2008) and thus may be seen as spiritual beings (Brockman, Taylor, & Brockman, 2008). Are Furies engaging in zoomorphism as a spiritual quest for authenticity (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010)? These questions inform our exploration of zoomorphic consumption.

Method

To explore the practice of zoomorphism we conducted a netnography of Furry websites. In the consumer culture context, online communities can provide useful insight into the representation of others as it pushes the definitional boundaries of self, community and text (Gatson, 2011). The use of online data was particularly important for gaining entry to this community given that the trivialisation and stigmatisation of the community, and low likelihood of Furies sharing their identity with loved-ones or members of the general public (Gerbasi et al., 2011). Researchers have also noted that Furies tend to prefer virtual forums in which to self-authenticate (Bryant & Forsyth, 2012).

We investigate the zoomorphic practices of the Furry sub-culture applying Kozinets (2010) archival and observational approach to netnography. We collected multiple sources of online data, including forum conversations (both observed and with minor participation), videography data, photographic evidence, digital audio recordings, and analysis of historic online community conversations. Using multiple sources of data allowed us to gain a holistic view of this sub-culture's online behaviour. To achieve this we extend on traditional field methods wherein the authors immersed themselves within the cultural data of multiple online research sites (Ferreday, 2011; Gatson 2011; Kozinets, 2002, 2010).

Identification of these online locations was a continual process throughout the research. We followed Kozinets and Handelman's (2004) approach to identifying relevant sources of textual discourse from online Furry communities. This ensured we were able to

identify a rich cross-selection of Furry websites, rather than relying on search engine rankings. We started by entering broad terms (e.g. Furry, Plushie, cosplay, animal role play, anthropomorphise and costume, etc.) into Internet search engine, *Google*, to help identify possible locations of Furry activity. As we familiarised ourselves with Furry online culture we cultivated a lexicon of key phrases and language specific to the sub-culture (e.g. Furs, fursuit, fursona, Furdom, Furrydom, furriness/furryness, muzzle and nuzzle, other kin, Therin, yiff and yiffy, etc.). These terms were used to enhance our search and track relevant sites using a language born from the culture under investigation.

Through interaction with community members we were able to identify other websites and online sources that were not identified from our searches. This revealed that some informants also held memberships/accounts with multiple forums. From this we were able to identify a ring of online community activity and network informants' textual discourses across a variety of online touch points. This also allowed us to analyse the consistency of informants' textual discourse. These sites were refined into a network of Furry-centric social forums, isolated Furry websites (usually consisting of bulletin boards that list events, meet-ups and links to other social websites), extended social networks (such as *Myspace* and *Twitter*), photo sharing repositories (such as *Flickr*), and public video sharing sites (including *Youtube*, *Vimeo*, and *Dailymotion*).

We applied Kozinets (2002) level of online community involvement criteria to identify and assess the types of relationships (see Table 1) members had with each forum (*tourists* have minimal social ties or deep interest in the activity; *minglers* have strong social ties but little interest in the activity; *devotees* have few social ties but a strong interest in the activity; and *insiders* have strong social ties and interest in the activity). Although we are not seeking to generalise to the population of Furries (and certainly not “anthromorphs”), the

informants listed in Table 1 reflect the fursona and gender splits identified by Gerbasi et al. (2011).

To avoid the possibility of “thinner” levels of description (Travers, 2009, p. 173) that may cause concern over the immediate transcription of single posts, we complemented our dialogue with subjects by analysing their forum history and constructing archives of their posted communications. This allowed us to identify possible biases created from our involvement; analysing informants’ historic text posted before our involvement helped us to weigh the plausibility of informant discussion. Adopting this approach enabled us to gain the same level-of-depth as a one-hour interview, historic text based analysis of archival sources, or daily participation of a physical world ethnographic study (Gatson, 2011).

This approach allowed us to identify relevant posts that held richer forms of communication and cultural meaning. This process involved note taking of our observations, intermixed with reflexive commentary, while navigating our way through the interactive communications of forum members. This included the identification and comparison of subtexts across single and multiple posts of each subject. Following this process allowed us to reveal themes related to the self and insights into fursona meaning (e.g. nobility, misunderstood, a life in the shadows, hidden power, etc.). This ensured that observations and download techniques facilitated a “rigorous” cultural investigation (Kozinets, 2002, p. 64).

Analysis consisted of coding and interpretation, and involved iteration and overlap between the two throughout the process (Spiggle, 1994). This activity occurred during and post data collection; beginning from the initial moment of our Internet search and induction into online Furry culture. Coding consisted of identifying classifications from the collections of online cultural materials (websites, forum conversations, photos, videos, etc.) that we collected during our investigation. The cultural material was deconstructed into thematic units, which then allowed us to label data as belonging to more general phenomenon

(Kozinets, 2010). To create a higher order of abstraction we sorted categories based on similarities and drew comparisons across critical events in the data. Following this we were able to generalise the data into distinct tropes that explained the main narrative found from within the data.

Trustworthiness was ensured by adapting traditional interpretivist criteria of credibility and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), with Kozinets (2010) netnographic criteria of coherence, rigour, groundedness and verisimilitude. Rigour is further enhanced by clearly outlining our approach and steps taken to collect netnographic data, including approaches to entrée and purposefully drawing from a holistic network of online communities populated by Furies. We achieved groundedness by ensuring theoretical representations are represented by the data and that interpretation of the data is closely linked with credible literature (Kozinets, 2010). Lastly, verisimilitude, the likelihood of the online text being true, was achieved by reproducing, contrasting and mapping exemplars of cultural representation.

Consistent with the ethics of netnography we announced ourselves to forum administration and community members. Private forums were classified as those sites that required the registration of a user name and password before being allowed to view content. We obtained written consent by making an “Introduction and Request” post that informed members about our research aims, as well as requesting their permission to observe and quote forum conversations (both new and historic), and engage in forum activities. We also used our introduction to field questions and comments from members about our intentions and how the data would be used. In addition, the lead author provided his work email address and details of his real world identity to reassure community members of his academic association. Informants’ avatars, forum names, and real world identities have been cloaked to maintain their right to privacy.

Table 1: Informant details

Pseudonym	Fur species	Gender	Age	Orientation	Number of posts	Level of community involvement
Abel	Snow leopard	Female	21	Heterosexual	966	Insider
Bella	Cheetah	Female	19	Heterosexual	109	Devotee
Cherrybear	Bear	Male	20	Pansexual	1858	Insider
Clover	Deer	Male	20	Homosexual	342	Devotee
Discworld	Furry	Male	21	Heterosexual	789	Insider
Foxtail	Fox	Male	26	Homosexual	243	Insider
Frisky	Wolf	Female	22	Bisexual	3708	Insider
Grolf	Wolf	Male	22	Heterosexual	7082	Insider
Haze	Hornet	Male	19	Heterosexual	30	Devotee
Howling Moon	Werewolf-Shaman	Male	25	Heterosexual	10955	Insider
Jungle King	Lion	Male	22	Bisexual	3527	Insider
Karzza	Hound	Male	36	Homosexual	15631	Insider
Kitshimi	Wolf	Male	23	Heterosexual	9764	Insider
Kuppo	Fox	Male	24	Heterosexual	269	Insider
Lowen	Werewolf	Male	40	Homosexual	7998	Insider
Lucian	Wolf dog	Male	24	Homosexual	1127	Insider
Minotaugh	Cow	Female	29	Bisexual	3630	Insider
Pepper	Spotted hyena	Female	25	Bisexual	114	Devotee
Porthos	Wolf	Male	23	Heterosexual	59	Devotee
Rabble	Bunny	Male	23	Heterosexual	2277	Insider
Raylene	Tiger	Female	27	Bisexual	249	Insider
Rocky	Raccoon	Female	21	Heterosexual	3655	Insider
RooRoo	Kangaroo	Male	23	Heterosexual	1527	Insider
Rusty	Wolf	Male	27	Homosexual	134	Devotee
Sari	Lion	Male	47	Bisexual	2000	Insider
Sasha	Lion	Male	47	Bisexual	1999	Insider
Shadow	Raccoon	Female	25	Pansexual	137	Devotee
Snowy	Husky	Male	25	Homosexual	222	Insider
Spiritwalk	Fox	Female	21	Bisexual	81	Devotee
Squawk	Red-tailed hawk	Male	27	Heterosexual	826	Insider
Squeeze	Brown bear	Male	30	Bisexual	2650	Insider
Sweetums	Malamute	Male	35	Homosexual	12776	Insider
Stardust	Therin	Female	22	Heterosexual	1853	Insider
Sunkissed	Ram	Male	23	Bisexual	103	Devotee
Thunder	Cheetah-jackal	Female	20	Bisexual	2175	Insider
Traveller	Wolf	Male	20	Heterosexual	78	Devotee
Ukela	Fox	Female	23	Homosexual	1924	Insider
Wylde Horsie	Stallion	Male	27	Bisexual	31	Devotee
Zippy	Kangaroo	Male	38	Homosexual	2383	Insider

Findings

In addressing our research questions we drew on Arnould and Price's (2000) framework of postmodern self-authentication. Using this framework we first examined how Furries engaged in authenticating acts ("self-referential behaviours that reveal or produce the true self" (Arnould & Price, 2000, p. 8)) through an analysis of their narratives regarding their fursonas, periods of personal awakening to this fursona, and their consumption practices. This led us to identify three motive-driven narratives deployed by Furries as part of an authenticating act: escape, healing, and power. Rather than separate motives, these narratives are interconnected and together represent a magical process by which Furries achieve self-authentication and build engagement with the world. For example:

I have 2 guides. I used to go to pow wows but haven't done so in 15+yrs. My family says I'm part Apache and Algonkian, but even with avidly doing my family history, I still can't find any proof. :cry: I've always felt a connection to the Lakota, their wisdom mean[s] a lot to me. I changed my RL [real life] name (on my SS [social security] card, but not yet on my birth cert) when I was 15 (damn almost 20yrs ago now!), to something very Native and in honour of my two guides. Unfortunately I look quite white, so I was never received to well at Pow Wows. (Karzza)

I think the Furry fandom is the greatest thing to ever happen to the world! Most of the greatest people I have ever met [were] Furries! I've been more inspired by Furries then I ever have my entire life from anyone! The world seems less crazy, less dangerous, less horrible with Furries around! Personally, I have always felt a connection with huskies since I was a kid. When I was 17 I worked at a drive in movie theater. It was there that I met my first Furry! He was the guy who ran the company's website and was there

watching a movie. I asked about his shirt which was a Morphicon shirt and he told me about the fandom. Later that night when I was online looking at vari[ou]s websites about the Furry fandom it was then that it hit me that I was a Furry and being a Furry just feels right! It's a wonderful way to escape the world and it's an even better way to express myself! (Snowy)

The two passages above provide evidence that all three narratives are deployed to achieve self-authentication (see Snowy's second to last line for a quintessential example of self-authentication). For example, Karzza's disappointment of being rejected as a Native American because of his skin colour saw him draw on two animal identities as a means of escaping from his problematic skin tone, coming to terms with his pain and navigate between the real world (through a legal name change) and the Furry world where he has posted over 15,000 times and has a large number of active followers. Snowy recounts a similar tale, drawing on a powerful canine identity (a huskie) to come to terms with his sense of disconnection, and then using this to act more proficiently. This entire process involves contagious magic where informants seek a spiritual transfer of the animal spirit into their identity as a means of achieving self-authentication (Fernandez & Lastovicka, 2011).

Second, since we examined a community, we looked at how Furries acted collectively in order to explore the nature of authoritative performances (public or cultural displays reinforcing social bonds; Arnould & Price, 2000). These practices involved giving oneself over to the animal spirit through the construction of a fursuit and public communal displays of animal behaviour. Such authoritative performances also involved imitative magic (Fernandez & Lastovicka, 2011), allowing informants to build a stronger connection with their desired self (as expressed through their animal spirit). A summary of our findings is

provided in Figure 1. In doing so, we focus on the authentication practices of a few exemplar informants. Further examples of informant narratives are provided in Table 2.

Figure 1: Self-authentication via zoomorphism

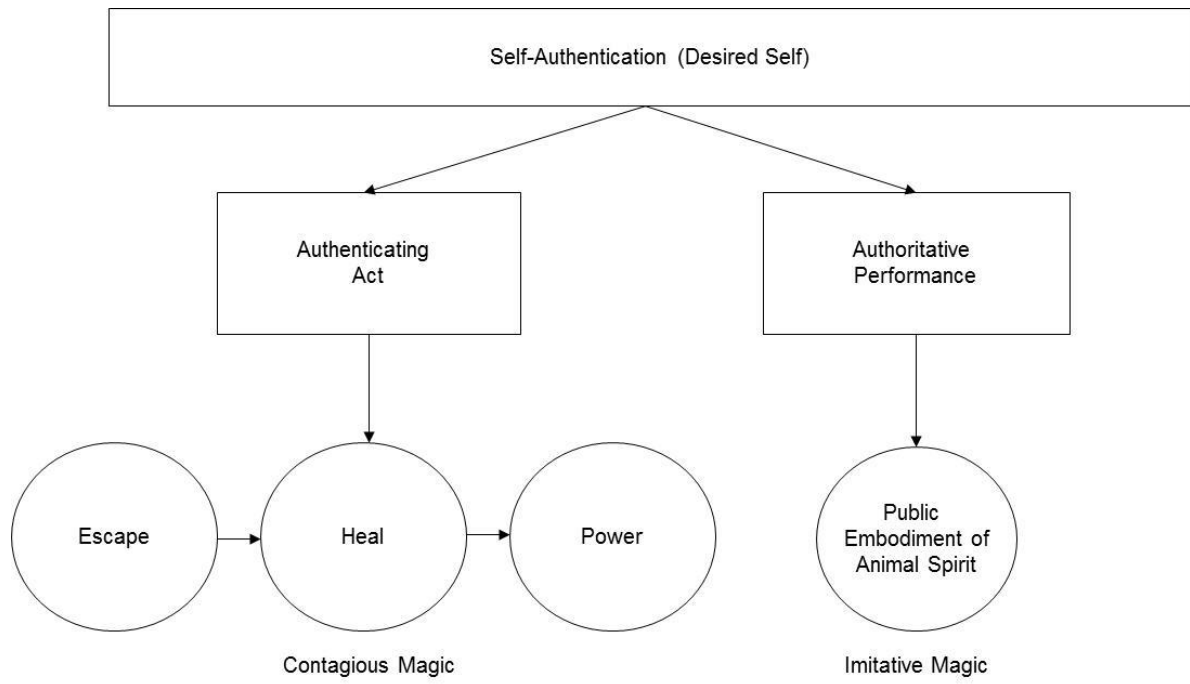


Table 2: Informant examples of authenticating acts

Authenticating acts	Informant Example
Escape	<p>Well, some people like switching between the two. I like it sometimes to be a Furry, but human other times. Some people may like being a Furry better than being human. That form of escapism may be better to them than simply being a human. I know a bit about that. I find my fantasy world and imagination to be more fun a lot of the time. And in a fandom where you can express it [imagination] even more, I'm sure that has to be another factor in consideration among other things. Some people may not feel that human. I've been there, for the reason I seemed to not get along with society, and didn't like most of the trends. But there's so many other reasons too why one would pick [to be a Furry]. ;3. (Discworld)</p> <p>Oh, you know. Females aren't supposed to be too aggressive. We're supposed to be all demure and reserved. If we actually admit we like it [sexual dominancy] then we get categorized as "Loose" or "Perverse". It's not as bad in the Fur-world. Were more equal here. But in the Yooo-muhn world. The "Big" reputation could really stick to a person. (Ukela)</p>
Healing	<p>Shortly after my spiritual awakening, I [became] in tune with nature and everything in it. Plantlife, animals, insects, water, the air, ground and stones. I started having dreams and visions of a fox, vixen for the appropriate term. [...]A little over a month I realized that that vixen, was actually me. After digging deeper within myself and accepting it fully [...] my world changed. (Spiritwalk)</p> <p>I have found that when I have had my times of stress, have allowed those things important to me like Furry slip, then I am less of who I am - it's not a space I enjoy being in, not being myself. While I don't necessarily go around telling all my co-workers (as a matter of fact only one close friend at work knows and she's totally cool with it), I know it's always inside me. My inner Furry. (Sasha)</p>
Power	<p>My fursona is connected to my personality/mannerisms. I know I have a spirit guardian, of sorts. My spirit guardian is an otter, which if I remember my Gaelic mythology, guides you on the path of Wisdom, Change, and detachment. Otters guided people to the Otherworld, where the dead dwell. (Shadow)</p> <p>I've been in the fandom for about 16 years, probably been a Furry for longer than that. I've given this some considerable thought over the years, and being that I'm also part American Indian (among other things) and have looked into the idea of totem animals, power animals and such from a shamanistic viewpoint I find it quite interesting. My fursona is feline, tiger for sure, though I know during meditation I have met other spirit power animals that have come in and out of my life - which are Hawk, Eagle, Wolf, Lion and Tiger. Yes I feel a spiritual connection to my tiger fursona and my lion fursona - since both have been there in the spirit realm when I have had need of them. Lion has often been the strongest, while tiger is there but a bit more elusive. My primary reason</p>

for having a tiger fursona has to do with my desire to do whatever I can, big or small, to help save them from extinction but that's a different topic. (Sari)

Narratives of escape

One common narrative among Furies involves notions of escape. Although some Furies are seeking to escape the modern world and material concerns, this escapism is not viewed as a temporary respite; rather, this narrative is a first step towards self-authentication. In these narratives Furies discuss pre-cultural or even fantastical times, often as part of a personal sense making strategy to understand one's felt disconnection from the modern world. For example:

I think it [Furrydom] represents a longing for something primal, basic perhaps even instinctual, that is increasingly absent in the modern digital age. Even as the Furry fandom might be seen as a kind of substitute wilderness, of sorts, we also have trends like tribal tattoos, and piercings—symbolic ways of reaching back to the past. (Sweetums)

Consistent with our magical process of self-authentication insiders in particular deploy this narrative when drawing on (or seeking contagion) an animal's spirit as a transformative force. One informant, Thunder, identifies these Furies as "Therins" (werewolf like creature, but without monstrous connotations). An example of this identity narrative is provided below by Lowen, through a public reading of his fictional story (whereby Furies are mistakenly thought of as monsters and often shunned or persecuted):

This could be the story of any of you I suppose [Furs and Spiritual Furs]. Perhaps you will find yourself in this story, I know I found myself here as well. I'll be reading in

the voice of Lowen. [The reading begins] Summer did not visit us this year. Eighteen-sixteen in the Scottish highlands had been hard. It was not the cold of the wind that worried me so; it was the cooling of the hearts. Since the beginning of time we had made this land our home. Like our brothers, the wolves, we were revered, loved in the early years. The humans relied on us and we on them. These were different times, the human eyes had changed; our secret lives had become our undoing. They saw what they wanted to see. We knew an era had ended. I should have seen it coming. Werewolves have no place in this world, they think we're monsters; blame us for the misdeeds of others. They do not know better. Death was everywhere, but now? It cannot be now, it is not my time. I am not ready. (Lowen)

Lowen's reading in many ways reflects J.R.R. Tolkien's pre-modern world (before the "time of men") where magic operates and intelligent "monsters" live alongside human beings (although not always peacefully). Consistent with Tolkien's world, Lowen views humans as captive to their "child like" nature, and therefore does not blame them for his plight or the plight of his brother wolves and were-creatures. In contrast, he blames himself for his failure to foresee the changes wrought by the coming age of humanity, recognizing mournfully that his time has passed and that he (and his kind) no longer belong. The choice of a fantastically powerful but "grey" creature (werewolves have uncertain moral status in Western literature because they remain part human, part other—in contrast to other "undead" characters) may also represent a means by which Lowen secures his sense of masculinity (the powerful "wolf") or even a form of hypermasculinity which gay men often use as a means of fighting stigmatization (Ruangwanit & Wattanasuwan, 2009). Ukela's passages in Table 2 reflect a similar motive from a female point of view.

Magical narratives often emphasize interconnectedness between things, beings and nature and are used by consumers to cope with a sense of things being “broken” (St. James, Handelman, & Taylor, 2011). Narratives or cultural myths that often reify a more natural time (an edenic one when humans lived in harmony with nature; Thompson, 2004) are also deployed by consumers seeking to make sense of their place in the world. Although Furrries engage in this form of escape (those less committed to the culture view of escapism as a form of leisure-oriented fun; Goulding & Shankar, 2004), Lowen’s escape narrative is neither pleasure-driven, safety-focused, nor a permanent attempt to escape the market (Arnould, 2007); rather this narrative is the first step in deploying contagious magic to re-engage with the world (i.e., a response to a sense of alienation). Lowen’s account (and Karzza’s and Snowy’s above) enables him to legitimise Furriness as a way of life (i.e., self-authenticate) as a means of coping with his sense of being disconnected (for Lowen the animal spirit brings a sense of being made whole).

Narratives of healing

Consistent with Lowen’s narrative of escape and coping, Furrries also deploy their animal identities as a form of healing. This narrative is seen in the discussions between Furrries regarding their choice of spirit guide. For example, Pepper, a white female shares her story of how she first learnt about her animal spirit (part spotted hyena) while attending a spirit reading at her first Native American gathering:

She [a tribal elder] asked me to close my eyes for a moment, [...] I heard her gasp! Looking at me with what I can only describe [as] horrified expression. She told me [...] I was divided between two entities (a product of my troubled mental state...?). She gave my hand a quick squeeze and told me I was Coyote, as well as a spotty

animal she didn't know the name of. She [...] drew a small picture of it in the dirt. It looked somewhat like a Hyena, and I offered that to her. She nodded vigorously. Something inside me made sense that evening, and I do not question that old woman in any way. A knowledge beyond me tells me she is right, and I have never been a person who goes against their gut feelings. Since then I've been wearing a necklace of Coyote teeth, and I am in the process of remaking it to also bear Coyote claws. All my animal products have been humanely harvested; the animal was found dead due to age, a fight, or some other natural means. (Pepper)

For Pepper, the discovery (through the help of an externalised “sorcerer”—often necessary for consumers’ experience of magic; Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003) of her dual Furry identity enables her to reconcile her sense of confusion. Such a discovery enables Pepper to achieve peace and embrace her emotional or intuitive self. Probyn-Rapsey (2011) suggests Furies use animal identities as a means of circumventing “normalcy” and removing the gendered ways in which people view men and women. In this regard, Pepper’s choice of a hyena is important for two reasons—first, hyena society is matriarchal and second hyenas are hermaphrodites (particularly important given that Pepper is bisexual). This powerful (and beautiful) “totem” provides a compelling solution to Pepper’s bisexuality, her self-stated “troubled mental state” or outsider status, especially when combined with an identity of a lonely nomad (the coyote).

In response to claims Furies suffer species identity disorder (something we reject on the basis that consumers adopt many identity positions; Arnould & Thompson, 2005), Probyn-Rapsey (2011) suggests many Furies struggle with their human side. We support this contention and propose Furies draw on their animal spirits as a means of addressing this

identity struggle. Lowen deploys a similar healing narrative to come to terms with his feelings of disconnection from time and place. For example:

I do think it is something that allowed me to see my world differently. I used my fursona and my Furry world to help me fill in the gaps. I am one who abandoned all things Judeo/Christian decades ago. Stepping into my fursona permitted me to think things out from a different perspective. It drove my work [creative art work and writing] permitted me to speak of my own belief. (Lowen)

Lowen's passage builds on his earlier post identifying the relationship between his magical identity (Therin) (an escape narrative), his coming to terms with a sense of disassociation from (post)modernity (a healing narrative), and his approach to artistic production (a power narrative—see below). One driver of alienation in postmodernity has been the decline in certainty and traditional identity markers (provided by Judeo-Christianity in Lowen's and Snowy's cases) (Arnould & Price, 2000). One response to this, particularly among the middle and upper classes has been to seek out the authenticity of "primitive cultures" (see Pepper's reverence for the Native American elder) due to a belief such cultures are untainted by modern capitalism and self-interest (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Although we are unable to identify the economic class of our informants via netnography, alienation and the desire to overcome underpin many of narratives of healing. For example:

My fursona is based on my personality and overall interest in my Native American culture dealing with shape shifting, and since I can't talk about it or express my knowledge and experience about such things [to the general public] without being labelled as a freak, or bashed due to a lack of respect or ignorance, or far worse, one's

strong view that such things are impossible, I find it hard not to every day. (Howling Moon)

This sheds a different light on the motives for escapism identified by Arnould (2007) in his trenchant critique of those seeking to transcend the marketplace. We propose that temporary escape from “the system” provides the spiritual and identity sustenance for reengaging market hegemony, and enables outsiders to safely explore identity interests and cultures marginalized by the majority (as noted Cherokee Keetoowah informant Howling Moon). In his passage, Lowen’s animal spirit provides insight and clarity, enabling him to understand why he sees the world differently, resulting in unique artworks. And for Lowen, the animal world also provides a very real sense of certainty given the rejection of homosexuality by many religious institutions. As a result, Lowen’s totem provides the basis for self-authentication. Healing narratives involve Furies drawing on the power of their animal spirit, not to fulfil pleasure or satisfy states of imaginative hedonism, nor solely to reject those elements of life that are distasteful (Elliott, 1997), but as a necessary step towards overcoming a sense of alienation in order to reengage with the world more confidently.

As Hirschman (1994) notes, animal companionship often provides us with spiritual solutions not provided for by modernity. For example, we may delight in the antics of our animal companions because their lack of rationality reflects a deep desire to engage taboo desires. Pepper’s discovery of her twin animal spirits enables her to come to terms with her felt desires and act upon them with certainty and without guilt—in contrast to a society which values reason at the expense of emotion, ancient wisdom and intuition. Her healing narrative combines myths that associate “primitive cultures” with authentic knowledge and an interconnected logic typical of magical thinking (Fernandez and Lastovicka, 2011; St. James, Handelman, & Taylor, 2011).

Although both Pepper and Lowen are alienated from (post)modernity, in seeking magical contagion from the animal spirit they can reconcile their sense of self and draw on this animal magic to achieve practical outcomes in the physical world.

Narratives of Power

The third narrative we identified involves Furies drawing on an animal's intrinsic capabilities as a means of personal power or effectiveness in the (post)modern world. For example, Lowen provided his example of spiritual connection as a means of improving his creative writing. Spiritual Furs tend to accentuate their unique individuality by asserting extraordinary abilities, such as greater "wisdom", the power to "shapeshift", perform roles as "guides to the otherworld", possess a greater sense of "strength" and manifest heightened "senses". For example:

For me, I've felt a deep connection to wolves ever since I could remember. I'm very quiet (in real life) and tend to keep [to] myself. But [when] I'm with my friends, my pack, I feel very comfortable. We are very close knit to each other and share things with each other that never leave the group. Also, a wolf is what I see my spiritual form as, I have even had a few dreams but it looked a bit different. The ears were point-curved at the tips and extending down into half body length tendrils that glowed red when needed, increasing agility [and] strength etc. I have a very close connection to...for a lack of a better word, the spiritual realm (I'm also an empath). I often kind of tap into my spiritual self and every aspect of my being is increased. (Kitshimi)

Kitshimi's narrative draws together all three forms of self-authentication—he escapes into a dream world to gain power and understand his difficulty in making friends or engaging

with others in public (he is only comfortable within a small circle of close-knit friends—such pack loyalty and illusiveness being characteristics attributed to wolves), and draws on this totem to transform himself into a powerful being, capable of personal achievement. The self is able to use this power to *move beyond* a dissonance with mainstream culture/institutions (as demonstrated in the case of Lowen's abandonment of Christianity) and consume the animal spirit for the power needed to operate in the everyday. The overlap of illumination, conflict and fantasy can be seen in the narrative by Haze, a young male Spiritual Fur:

I refer to myself as Quetzalcoatl, and indeed that is a very strong and important aspect of myself... but as for my spiritual totem, I am guided by a creature most people fear and hate: The Hornet. [...] Most people only associate hornets with their violent temper, but they are so much more. Loyalty, dedication, harmony and order. A fierce defender of friends and family. The hornet represents duty, and respect for ones place in life. Faithfully subservient the hornet is, without need for expected reward. [...] Of course, let's not forget that temper of theirs. When threatened, either as an individual or a community hornets are a force to be reckoned with. A force strong enough to make much larger animals run away in terror. Hornets know the strength of banding together and working as a single force. (Haze)

Haze's narrative provides insight into narratives of power. First, is the choice of Furry name, the powerful, and simultaneously just and malevolent ancient (and non-Western) god Quetzalcoatl. Second, is the choice of a hornet as a spiritual guide--an insect that often provokes fear and flight among humans and animals. However, Haze is not engaging in some form of "will to power"; rather he draws on a wider understanding of hornet behaviour,

identifying that power is not deployed indiscriminately, but only to protect loved ones (or hive members).

In using narratives of power, Furies like Haze create an “extraordinary self” where the individual can be selfless but also driven by acts of self-preservation (Tumbat & Belk, 2011). Narratives of power represent the peak of contagious magic (Fernandez & Lastovicka, 2011)—where consumers draw directly on the animal spirit to achieve their goals. Haze demonstrates these characteristics as his animal spirit allows him to shift between feelings of romantic camaraderie towards friends and family, and the abnormal reckoning force of might and judgment (the feared wrath of the hornet), which conjures characteristics reminiscent of a comic book superhero weighted by great responsibility.

Narratives of power involve Furies drawing on an animal spirit as a means of self-authentication and as a means of operating more effectively in the everyday world. For example, Keaveney’s (2008) study of human-equine relations noted how owners reported unexpected practical benefits of interacting with horses—for example, since horses frighten easily, patience and talking calmly are critical—both of which owners reported as beneficial to improving everyday working relationships. Thus, through zoomorphism, consumers may seek spiritual power, but from the narratives presented, they do not appear to seek to live out id-driven fantasies, challenging the deviant view of Furrydom.

Authenticating acts: Furry practices

To achieve a state of self-authentication, consumers must not only engage in authenticating acts, but also need to engage in public or collective displays to rebuild collective ties (lost in a postmodern market that has decentred old markers of identity) (research reveals Furies tend to reject traditional markers such as organised religion; Gerbasi et al., 2011). These acts are called authoritative performances (Arnould & Price, 2000) and represent a public means by

which Furies reinforce their bonds to the community and critically reinforce the relationship of the human self with the non-human. For example:

Fursuited is [...] a good way to give something back to the fandom. While walking the halls one eve, before I had a suit - and in need of hugs due to post-con depression kicking in the last night, a friendly suiter noticed and gave me a hug - and I nearly cried just from the experience. [...] It felt as if my soul was filled when I most needed it, and I am grateful to this day for the warmth of spirit and generosity that suiter willingly shared with me. Sooo... I want to, and have shared with Furs what that Fursuiter shared with me. For me, it's the giving of hugs in suit, seeing peoples' faces light up and just knowing I brightened a part of their day that is sufficient reward. I find that by embracing Furry, I've really just opened the door to a whole different world - a world where we can create, dream, be [and] connect with others. (Sasha)

As Turner (1973) suggests, consumers seek a positive source of emplacement within a community. In the Furry community, emplacement can be achieved via memberships in online forums, attendance at annual conventions, and points in between (one Fur community we observed were members of a bowling league, met monthly and competed in full costume). In this way we see the consumption of the animal spirit as a powerful force as it helps the self to survive and endure as a communal and individual entity.

Authoritative performance among Furies involves demonstrating authenticity through giving oneself to the animal spirit through two practices: constructing a fursuit and public displays of animal behaviour. As noted in Figure 1, authoritative performances are necessary for self-authentication and also involve magic—in this case imitative magic where consumers seek to imitate the object (in this case an animal totem) in order to draw upon its

power (Fernandez & Lastovicka, 2011). For many Spiritual Furs the construction of a fursuit is a ritual used to manifest the animal spirit they perceive themselves to share a relationship with. These elements identify Furrydom as a type of spiritual experience. Its practitioners engage in the creation of a “free subject” drawing from different (and sometimes contradictory) methodologies of religious and mythic beliefs to form a synthesis of agreed meaning to achieve self-actualisation (Woodhead & Heelas, 2000, p. 272). However, as noted above, for Furries the process of physical alteration is driven by a deeper belief of a power within. Transformation in this context is not only about fitting in but actualising the spirit. The construction of a fursuit is thus a key authoritative performance marking one’s authentic commitment to the animal identity.

I’m supposing that furriness is only a hobby, like Otakus [fans of Japanese Anime and video game characters] wanting to dress up as their favourite character. Therins [a type of Spiritual Fur] have a spiritual connection to their animal. Furriness in of itself doesn’t mandate you have any spiritual beliefs about your animal. (Thunder)

Thunder’s account identifies that the construction of a fursuit is central to Furry insidedness. Although popular media accounts assume Furries primarily live in a fursuit, Gerbasi et al. (2008) dispel this myth, identifying that fursuits represent a significant emotional, artistic, time, and financial commitment by Furries. Thus, “dressing up” does not mark one as an insider Furry (as one can purchase pre-made suits), but fursuit construction does (since it involves greater commitment). The construction of these fursuits also allows for the building of communal bonds through artistic criticism and the sharing of creative tips regarding source material and construction practices.

An example of the communal benefits of constructing a fursuit is provided by Squawk (see Figure 2), the creator of a hawk fursuit. The images in Figure 2 are taken from the 2011 *Further Confusion* conference where Furry practitioners meet to share artwork, parade fursuit costumes, attend workshops and dance events (in costume), and socialise with other Furries. These authoritative performances build communal bonds because they provide the basis for conversations about the craft of suit making as well as enable people to reinforce the authenticity of their commitment to Furrydom (as told in their narratives above). The relationship between this form of authoritative performance and community building is identified in the passage below:

[Stardust] That tail made me squeal! [...] Congratulations on a job well done.

[Traveller] Are those hand painted turkey feathers?

[Squawk] I looked for turkey / eagle feathers at first, but couldn't find anything longer than 14". I needed tail feathers about 26" long, so I made these from thin polycarbonate sheet and muslin cloth, so the light would filter through like regular feathers. Then I just painted the growth bars and the dark tips onto the muslin.

[RooRoo] Wow, nicely done! I'd love to have a moving tail like that one at some point - thank you for making this and showing me it can be done!

[Squawk] Thanks! I will try to make a video showing specifically how they fold and splay.

The debut of the fursuit reflects a commitment to giving oneself over to the animal spirit, the celebration of which is shared with community members. The cultural value of this process is demonstrated in the resulting conversation about construction tips between Squawk and other Furries online. The ability to problem-solve and manufacture expertise within the

discipline of fursuit creation enhances the status of community members, while the sharing process forges community values on the basis of reciprocity (see Sasha's passage above).

Further examples of celebrating the animal spirit can be seen from forms of artistic expression. Another prominent example witnessed within the Spiritual Fur sub-culture is mimicking animal behaviour (Squawk's fursuit made audible bird calls) through rituals such as dancing and other public displays (online, at conventions, or in smaller events such as bowling teams). Figure 3 depicts scenes taken of a female Fur mouse at the 2011 *Further Confusion* convention where attendees took to the dance floor in fursuits to perform energetic routines. Like many of the attendees, this Fur mouse gave improvised performances combined with perfected dance routines that accentuated the cosmetic allure of the fursona.

Public displays, like dance, can help cultural groups transcend the norms and rules of everyday life (Goulding, Shankar, Elliott & Canniford, 2009). Public displays of cultural and spiritual practices help moderate unsettling sensations, such as alienation and estrangement. The performances made by Furies demonstrate how public displays connect members with a cultural identity that controls the pressures of everyday life. This is dually managed by the act of *coming out* as a group in a transient space (bowling alleys and convention centres are examples of such spaces). The accomplishment of the dance, or even bowling a strike for the team, is a gift designed to celebrate the success of the community (Kozinets, 2002). These behaviours reinforce the value of the community and enhance solidarity bonds (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Goulding et al., 2009).

Although the consumption of animal spirits takes place within the mind, authentication of this identity involves public displays (Arnould & Price, 2000). Artistic expression is one example of this process occurring as a transformation between spirit, mind and the body's interaction with the physical world. Artistic expression as evidenced by the acts of creative writing, fursuit construction and dance, can be seen as surrender to an

irrational, symbolic belief, which is an authentic act of creating a meaningful self-identity (Elliott, 1997).

Figure 2: Male hawk fursuit wearer with retractable wing system



Figure 3: Female mouse dancing at *Further Confusion* 2011



Discussion

Our findings make several contributions to our understanding of human-(non-human) animal relations. First, although studies by Gerbasi et al. (2008) are sensitive to Furrydom they do not get under the skin of Furies. Rather than trivialising Furrydom as symbolic deviancy (or just a form of dressing up and acting out; Bryant & Forsyth, 2012) the authenticating acts and authoritative performances of Furies represent creative strategies by which consumers understand their lack of place, come to terms with their identity and then draw on that power to reconnect with the world. Thus, our findings support Hirschman's (1994) belief that relations with animals are one means that consumers seek to fill the void left by the market.

Far from acting out the desires of the id, zoomorphism is how Furies discover and build a sense of self. Paradoxically, in adopting non-human form, Furies reinforce Brownlie's (2008) proposal that relations with animals are one means that consumers become more human. And, zoomorphism is also a means by which Furies attempt to become *better* humans, in line with Keaveney's (2008) observations about the personal benefits experienced by owners of horses. In addressing one of the gaps identified in the literature review, Furies deploy animal identities to achieve identity goals, but far from seeking emancipation from the marketplace, they both co-create a new market (for their art) and draw on their untamed animal spirit to operate more effectively within it.

We also contribute to our understanding of anthropomorphisation and self-identity. Our findings demonstrate that zoomorphism and anthropomorphism are not dualistic opposites, but interrelated. Despite drawing their identities from the non-human world, Furies nonetheless are forced to engage in anthropomorphism when identifying their animal spirit and the cues they draw upon to achieve self-authentication. Haze for example, cannot know whether hornets attack only to protect their hive any more than Kitshimi can really

know the motives of wolf behaviour or social relations. Therefore, anthropomorphism and zoomorphism are conceptually related, although we believe each serves a different purpose.

Research on anthropomorphism focuses on how consumers build connections with objects and animals. Thus, people may anthropomorphise animals in order to achieve companionship (Hirschman, 1994; Holbrook & Woodside, 2008), and/or reflect their self to others (Ahuvia, 2008; Beverland, Farrelly, & Lim, 2008). Anthropomorphism involves attributing human characteristics to animals to connect with the other, and/or use the other to reflect the self externally, whereas our findings demonstrate that zoomorphism is primarily about using the animal to repair the self as a means of reconciling oneself with the world. Future research should examine the interplay between these two approaches, given that self-authentication requires behaviours that reflect and reveal the true self (Arnould & Price, 2000).

Limitations and future research

This research is exploratory and thus subject to all the normal limitations associated with non-population sampling. To address these limitations we believe further examination of the “anthromorph” community is deserved. Although we deliberately chose to focus on insiders, we believe focusing on different subcultures such as Plushies would help illuminate the practice of zoomorphism in consumption. For example, we suspect that Plushies (i.e., those interested in fantasy art or Manga type human-animal hybrids) *may* be more likely to do so as a means of acting out the darker desires proposed in Hirschman’s (1994) study of animal-human relations. Gerbasi et al. (2011) noted that not all Furrries identified with an animal spirit—thus studying the practices of hobbyists would be worthwhile.

We also believe studies focusing on heterogeneity within the community would also be worthwhile. For example, are there multiple authenticities within the Furry community?

What status games exist within this community between different types of “anthromorphs”? Also, drawing on CCT research (Arsel & Thompson, 2011), how do Furry insiders protect their field level investments in the face of increased marketization in relation to zoomorphism (Manga artwork, how to draw Furry character guides, ready to wear costume and so on)? And, given that few Furies “come out” or identify as such (even to loved ones (Gerbasi et al., 2011)), what drives those who do self-identify (is it a desire to normalize the community), and what is the status of such activities (is it perceived as trivialisation)?

Finally, we believe further attention to issues of gender, alienation, class and race would offer important insights into zoomorphism and identity motives. Since the choice of animal spirit is always framed in socially constructed terms (including gender), we wonder whether certain choices may reinforce existing structures. For example, although Pepper’s choice of a hyena spirit may reflect her sense of powerlessness as a bisexual, and/or a desire to challenge existing gender norms, the hyena is also framed as the quintessential “bad guy” of the animal kingdom (thanks in part to Walt Disney’s *Lion King* franchise). Hyenas are seen as dirty scavengers (in contrast to “noble” lions), dangerous and strange. Therefore, Pepper’s choice may simply involve swapping one gendered stereotype for another, resulting in a reinforcement of outsider status. Future research could investigate this issue, perhaps through examining how informants deal with any negative images associated with certain non-human animals.

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